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Fears (Real and Excessive) From Warning on Tuna

By JENNIFER 8. LEE

When Joseph Ugalde, 38, a San Francisco marketing executive, goes out for lunch, he orders the Chinese chicken salad, the turkey avocado sandwich or sometimes the chicken pesto melt.

But as of last month, one thing he will not order is tuna fish. No tuna salads. No tuna sandwiches. No tuna melts. "I loved tuna melts," Mr. Ugalde said somewhat wistfully. "Or I did."

Now, however, Mr. Ugalde is boycotting tuna, which he used to eat once or twice a week, because of federal advisories about mercury in it.

"When you are seeing headlines about mercury splashed across newspapers, it puts up a little warning sign across your head," said Mr. Ugalde, who recently warned a co-worker who was on the low-carbohydrate Atkins diet about the tuna she was eating every day.

Consumers like Mr. Ugalde are the tuna industry's nightmare as they react to a federal warning about the mercury content in albacore tuna. More than \$1.5 billion worth of canned tuna is sold in the United States each year. A staple of school lunches, dieters' meal plans and office workers' brown bags, canned tuna accounts for 20 percent of the seafood consumed in this country.

That statistic suggests why the industry lobbied hard for four years to keep a federal warning about mercury off cans of albacore tuna. In that period, consumption of all types of tuna in the United States has dropped by over 15 percent, and tuna has been displaced by shrimp as the most popular seafood in the country.

Already this year, as word that white tuna would be added to the advisory began circulating, sales of canned white tuna have dropped 6 percent. And now that the advisory has been formally issued, anecdotal evidence suggests that consumption of canned tuna — and perhaps seafood in general — will take a serious hit.

Never mind that the federal advisory is just for young children and women who plan to have children. Never mind that the advisory covers only white albacore tuna, and not light tuna, which has a lower mercury content — and is cheaper. Never mind that the advisory actually recommends limiting consumption of albacore tuna to six ounces per week — that is one or two meals — as opposed to eliminating it entirely. And never mind that the federal government says tuna is actually very good for people — an affordable, low-fat, high-protein source of the omega-3 fatty acids that reduce heart disease.

Health professionals are worried that the advisory's message is being heard all wrong in a country plagued by obesity and heart problems.

"The message of fish being good has been lost," said Eric Rimm, a professor of epidemiology and nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health, "and people are learning more about the hypothetical scare of a contaminant than they are of the well-documented benefits of coronary disease reduction. The dangers of the tuna fish is not well documented compared to the potential dangers for a 50-year-old male or female who are at much higher risk of coronary death."

The decline in the fortunes of tuna began in 2001 when the Food and Drug Administration first issued an advisory to women and children about mercury in seafood. That warning recommended that people limit their consumption of swordfish, shark, tilefish and king mackerel. It did not mention tuna. With the new advisory specifically mentioning albacore, the tuna industry is hoping that sales do not go into a free fall.

In an effort to head off an overreaction to the advisory, officials from the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency included in the official advisory a list of other seafood with a low mercury content — including light tuna, which happens to be what is used in the national school lunch program, overseen by the Agriculture Department. And the officials added two sentences high in the advisory emphasizing how seafood helps the heart, as well as children's growth and development.

But as doctors know, too many people get their health information through quick news headlines, office chatter and random dips into Web sites.

"Pieces of it get pulled out and are not put into the context," said Dr. David W. K. Acheson, the director of food safety at the F.D.A.

Doctors say anecdotal evidence suggests that the advisory's message has been muddled.

"I enjoyed eating fish, but when I got evidence to the contrary, it just completely destroyed my feelings about its benefits," said Andrew Hayes, 39, of Chicago, who said he used to eat fish once or twice a week. "I understand it's irrational, but it's the way it is."

Boycotting fish or cutting back seems particularly common among pregnant women. Victoria Pericon, 30, a New York City resident who gave birth last July, said, "I swore off eating all types fish while I was pregnant because I wasn't sure what other kinds of contaminants they would find in what other kinds of fish."

Nutritionists are particularly concerned when women stop eating fish because women tend to be the gatekeeper to the dinner table in the household. That is exactly what has happened in the home of Paula Chase-Hyman, who has stopped serving fish despite the fact that her 9-year-old daughter likes it. Ms. Chase-Hyman, 33, a pregnant woman who lives near Annapolis, Md., said, "Because I have cut it out of my diet that means I'm not cooking it."